

PERSONS, PLACES, LOCAL TIME

by

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Much of Corpus Christi's long history as an isolated city hosting few "great" events besides rich shipwrecks and the staging of the Mexican War, is poorly known. Our apparent lack of drama, as much as the destruction of records by Federal troops and natural disasters Briscoe cites in City By The Sea, is one reason. An obscure place implies dull people and inconsequential lives, but the truth is otherwise and there lies the key to understanding our city.

Most of my relatives, for example, arrived during the 1930s. One great-grandfather, Arthur N. Richardson, born in Ft. Recovery, Ohio in 1862, came here about 1935. A retired pharmacist who'd settled in 1904 in Electra, north of Wichita Falls, he and his wife accompanied their granddaughter Jo Moffett and her husband Bill, seeking work on NAS.

Arthur Richardson was followed by his son, R. B. Richardson, who was employed by NAS till he retired, and by his children and their families. His daughters, my aunt and mother, became librarians (the latter for years Local History Librarian) first at the old Jones house, then the

recently demolished La Retama building. R. B. Richardson's son, Arthur Richardson's grandson, is former Del Mar College president Dr. Jean Richardson.

During the next twenty years the elder Richardsons lived at several addresses. My great-grandmother died here, and Arthur Richardson went in the mid 1950s to live with his daughter in Dallas. There he died at age ninety-five, while his son's family stayed in Corpus Christi.

I tried while researching his life here to locate some of the places he had lived. I checked his few existing letters and the Library's collection of city directories and telephone books (the volumes progressively thicken, showing the city's growth), and was able to list a few of his addresses and phone numbers.

Some of his homes still stand, altered by years of other tenants. In 1942 and 1944 he lived on Glendale, near the site of the college auditorium that was to bear his family name. In 1946 Arthur Richardson lived at 1920 Craig Street, a house later demolished to make way for Crosstown Expressway.

More detective work was sometimes needed. I always heard that my great-grandmother died 7 January, 1945, in a house on Carroll Lane. My grandfather once or twice

pointed it out to me, but that was thirty-five and more years ago and I couldn't recognize its surroundings anywhere along that street. With good reason, I found.

The 1944 City Directory gives the Richardsons' Glendale address, the 1946 edition the one on Craig Street; sometime between those years they had lived along Carroll Lane.

Her obituary in the Library's microfilm newspaper archives stated simply that Mrs. Richardson had died in her house on Carroll Lane. The County Clerk and Bureau of Vital Statistics keep birth and death certificates....records that can also add to persons' knowledge of their medical background. A subject's name, date of birth/death, and his or her parents' names are needed to get copies. Her death certificate gave no house number on Carroll Lane.

Finally my aunt recalled that the house lay off Carroll Lane on a street called Dalraida. Since its site is now occupied by apartments fronting both Dalraida and Brawner Parkway, part of the ongoing switch from house toward apartment living, the area naturally no longer looks the same as when my grandfather had shown it to me before 1955.

There's no surprise in this, which brings me to one thing for which I found my research generally useful:

showing those changes in Corpus Christi that have bit by bit added up to the present city. The house near the Ayers-McArdle intersection that my parents bought in 1947 has seen plenty of them.

Back then a farm covered the future Borden Plant grounds; a rectangular lot from Gabriel Street to Ayers, its last patch, remained till the 1960s vacant and bounded by a dirt McArdle Road. SPID was two lane Lexington Road and all the land from Mission Shopping Center to Gollihar and west out of sight was cotton field.

It was quiet enough to hear the bells of Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church at Kostoryz clearly beyond Ayers. Drainage was so poor that ankle deep ditchwater stood for days after a rain. Old photographs can bring out these physical changes; others are harder to show.

The Corpus Christi Arthur Richardson found in 1935 must have differed even more from today's. Many of its buildings still stand, if remodeled and repainted. But its neighborhoods can't be the same, not only from new construction or because some now in town were semi-rural. He was well off and white, and one of his houses is now occupied by a Black family. As long as he was here racial segregation wasn't just a social convention, but State law.

By tracking his residences I saw how once poor

Blacks and Hispanics moved into places formerly restricted. What would a white man born in Civil War Ohio make of the changes in Texas' ethnic relations since the 1950s?

I can't answer that question, but this kind of research can help do so for the community as a whole as well as show his and others' roles in making Corpus Christi. Changes in ethnic composition, in social interactions, in wealth, in work; the reasons people came and the reasons they left -- in our city's case, both are more often personal than political -- and much more remain to be explored. As the picture develops, hidden factors may be uncovered and fascinating tales told.

Corpus Christi's past is best recovered as it was largely made, not by individuals caught up in big events so much as those acting for personal reasons. The doings of seemingly obscure people, in fact, are the real meaning of this place. Family histories, which can often be tied to known locales and conditions, are the right way to understand this complex tale. Anyone can contribute: those interested in their roots, in search of identity, undertaking class projects. It is fun to do, and from the sum of many such stories our history will be definitively written.